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SUBJECT: Khomeini's Dwindling Power Base

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The biggest loss has been the disaffection of Iran's Azarbayjani minority. More than 20 percent of the country's

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[redacted]

population, the Azaris gave Khomeini important support during the revolution, but have clearly withdrawn it now. The Azarbayjanis would be an even more significant problem if their spiritual leader, Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, was willing to confront Khomeini openly. Shariat-Madari's caution is giving the left opportunity to gather strength in the strategic northwest area. [redacted]

Iran's other minorities, already restless before the hostage crisis, have been further disaffected in the last two months. The Kurdish dissidents are the best organized and are already effectively in control of their homelands, and the regime's hold on the other minority areas is slipping. Khuzestan--quiet since summer--and Khomeini's oil revenues remain vulnerable to Arab autonomists, radical Palestinian or Arab agitators, and Iranian leftists.

The Iranian left has profited from the freer operational environment produced by the hostage crisis. The pro-Soviet Tudeh has not been noticeably damaged by the regime's adverse but cautious reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan. While publicly supporting Khomeini, the Tudeh is probably recruiting in the military and oilfields, preparing for an ultimate bid for power. [redacted]

Iran's other leftists, including the more numerous Peoples Fedayeen guerrillas, are badly divided. The Fedayeen has been active in cementing its ties to the minorities. For the first time in months, Fedayeen supporters in Tehran clashed with Khomeini's backers last week. [redacted]

Even Khomeini's staunchest backers are starting to waver. Many in the religious establishment have long preferred Shariat-Madari and his view that the clergy should not play a prominent role in politics. The lower classes are increasingly unhappy with high unemployment and underemployment. [redacted]

[redacted]

Khomeini's Style

The Ayatollah's leadership--aloof and uncompromising--served him well against the Shah, but has consistently damaged his prospects in recent months. By failing to compromise

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with Shariat-Madari over the constitution, Khomeini lost the Azarbayjanis. By refusing to accept the other minorities' original requests for autonomy and their concerns about the constitution, he has pushed them to demand even more self-rule. [redacted]

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Khomeini's single-minded pursuit of the Islamic Republic has alienated the secularist intelligentsia, the technocrats and the bulk of the middle classes. Without their backing his regime has little hope of creating the effective bureaucracy, military, and economy necessary to satisfy Iranian needs. [redacted]

Outlook

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Khomeini's opponents remain divided and none are confident enough as yet to openly challenge his hold on the central government. The military is disaffected, but paralyzed by poor morale and continuous purges. Moreover, Khomeini's charisma can still mobilize the mobs. [redacted]

Nonetheless, while the Ayatollah's short term prospects remain good, the long term trend is clear. As presently constituted, Khomeini's regime is too narrowly based to survive. Further economic deterioration or simultaneous uprisings by the minorities could lead to the regime's collapse. The Ayatollah's death could lead to complete chaos. [redacted]

The danger for the US is that the longer Khomeini remains in power, the more radicalized Iran becomes. The moderate centrist parties like the National Front and National Democratic Front have been destroyed. It is becoming increasingly likely that Khomeini's successor will be just as extreme. Even worse, the collapse of Khomeini's regime with or without the Ayatollah could throw the country into complete anarchy. [redacted]